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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

15 November 1978

MEMORANDUM

CURRENT TENSIONS BETWEEN ANGOLA AND SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa ended its military intervention in the Angolan civil war because Soviet and Cuban military aid for the MPLA surpassed South Africa's capabilities for a sustained confrontation, and also because Prime Minister Vorster realized that prolonging open intervention would wreck his diplomatic strategy of constructive coexistence with Black Africa. Subsequently, Pretoria has sought persistently to cultivate informal diplomatic contacts with the Neto government, to induce Luanda to curtail SWAPO's cross-border operations and take other steps toward reducing military pressures along the Angolan border with Namibia, and to salvage the major Cunene River hydroelectric and irrigation projects that were nearing completion when the Portuguese withdrew from Angola.

Although Luanda has more often than not rebuffed Pretoria's overtures, there has been a rough standoff since the pullout of South African troops in early 1976. The rationale that motivated the troop withdrawal has deterred the South Africans from another sustained military intervention, even though SWAPO infiltrations have gradually

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increased since 1976 and the South Africans have been increasingly concerned about the SWAPO buildup in southern Angola. The Angolans, on the other hand, apparently have not done as much as they could to support SWAPO's cross-border operations; fear of South African counter measures no doubt has figured among the deterrents.

Both the South Africans and the Angolans have hoped that the Western settlement proposal would result in dispelling the risks of an escalating guerrilla war in Namibia, and the hope has motivated both sides toward accepting some restraints. By the same token, South Africa's decision to hold an election in Namibia without UN participation, and SWAPO's apparent determination to disrupt the election, have reopened the risk of a serious military confrontation between South Africa and Angola.

The South Africans clearly consider it imperative to deter a surge of guerrilla infiltrations before the December election. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Brand Fourie, Permanent Secretary of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs, was quietly trying to dissuade the Angolans from supporting a guerrilla offensive. Last week, however, an Angolan Defense Ministry communique warned that South African attacks on Angolan towns were imminent and called for an emergency curfew.

Fourie's latest efforts to open high-level contacts with the Angolan government suggests that South Africa will withhold major military strikes against the SWAPO bases in Angola until diplomatic overtures are definitely rebuffed, or until an Angolan pledge to restrain guerrilla infiltration is proved to be empty. Angolan President Neto, however, is unlikely to make a categorical pledge in the absence of a UN-sponsored truce. Moreover, it is doubtful that Angolan authorities can fully restrain SWAPO staging operations, although they probably can delay major guerrilla infiltrations by withholding local logistic support.

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Hence the most likely outcome of quiet diplomatic discussions of border problems under present circumstances is a warning that continuing guerrilla infiltrations will compel South Africa to react militarily. The South Africans are also likely to stress that the scale of their military incursions into Angola will match the scale of guerrilla infiltrations.

It therefore appears more likely than not that South Africa will soon launch limited strikes against the SWAPO bases situated near the Namibia border. South African military operations probably would be designed to minimize the risks of confrontation with Angolan or Cuban troops. We doubt that the Angolans--or the Cubans--will attempt to defend all of SWAPO's many forward bases [REDACTED]

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South African Prime Minister P.W. Botha, however, very likely will refrain from major military incursions into Angola as long as there is no marked increase in SWAPO's cross-border operations, and the Angolans indicate willingness to maintain some restraints. Last May, Botha, who was then Minister of Defense, advocated going ahead with the raid on Cassinga, but now, as Prime Minister, he is likely to pay more heed to the diplomatic consequences of such action. Under present circumstances a major military incursion, especially if it penetrates deeply into Angola, would not only scuttle Western efforts to salvage the UN settlement program for Namibia but also make it extremely difficult for Western members of the Security Council to rebuff African demands for mandatory economic sanctions against South Africa.

SWAPO spokesmen have been calling for increased international support for armed struggle since former Prime Minister Vorster announced on 20 September that South Africa would go ahead with an election in Namibia without UN participation. Angolan leaders are sensitive to international pressures, but they also fear South African counter measures if there is a marked increase in cross-border operations--not only military incursions, but also substantial South African support for UNITA guerillas in southern Angola. It seems

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fairly likely that Luanda will try to maintain some restraints on cross-border operations as long as there are no major South African incursions into Angola, and present hopes are not dashed for an early UN-sponsored settlement that would end the formidable South African military presence in Namibia.

Such a tenuous accommodation, however, could be suddenly upset by a few dramatic terrorist incidents, such as the assassination of a prominent figure in the Turnhalle Alliance or a single land mine explosion that kills a dozen children on their way to school. Although such incidents in the past have not triggered immediate military strikes into Angola, as the election date approaches the South African Prime Minister will be under mounting political pressures to react quickly with a dramatic display of military power. Thus there is a risk that small-scale terrorist acts by SWAPO may impel the South Africans into such provocative action that the Angolans will feel compelled to respond by giving unstinting support for a major guerrilla offensive and thus gain increased international support for an apparently unavoidable conflict with South Africa.

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